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**Pier Paolo Piciucco**

### **The Enigma of Identity: A Reading of *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje**

**Abstract I:** La finalità di questo saggio critico è quella di indagare sulla natura mista, postcoloniale, multiculturale e transnazionale così come affiora nel romanzo *Anil's Ghost* di Michael Ondaatje, con particolare attenzione alla protagonista Anil Tissera. Il mio lavoro prende forma in due fasi distinte: inizialmente discute le caratteristiche e la contraddittorietà di questa forma emergente di identità prendendo a prestito gli strumenti della critica postcoloniale e dei *diaspora studies*, con l'intenzione di analizzare come l'identità di Anil subisce modifiche nel corso del suo itinerario dallo Sri Lanka all'Inghilterra prima e agli Stati Uniti poi. Su un piano ideologico questo trasloco la sposta dalla periferia verso il centro del mondo postcoloniale. Nella seconda parte del saggio, analizzerò invece il modo in cui Anil si trova a scendere a patti con le proprie conflittualità interiori a seguito della sua esperienza da espatriata: in questa fase della mia ricerca farò riferimento anche ad *Unclaimed Experience* di Caruth, un testo chiave nell'orbita dei *trauma studies*, per dimostrare come gli effetti di esperienze traumatiche passate possano generare disorientamento e alienazione in un emigrato. Il dilemma si fa palese nel caso del ritorno a casa di un espatriato, proprio come avviene ad Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost*.

**Abstract II:** In this paper I aim at analysing the composite, postcolonial, multicultural and transnational nature of identity emerging in Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, most prominently in the protagonist Anil Tissera. My work progresses through two distinct stages: in the first part I discuss the quality and inner contradictoriness of this developing form of identity using the tools of postcolonial criticism and *diaspora studies*, basically focusing my attention on the ways in which Anil's identity undergoes modifications that may also appear ambiguous during her journey from Sri Lanka to England first and US later. Ideologically, that passage brings her from the periphery to the centre of the postcolonial world. In the second part of this paper I intend to shift my attention on how Anil needs to come to terms with the conflicting issues at the very roots of her identity formation as an expatriate: in this section of my work I will also employ Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, a fundamental text in trauma studies, in order to explain how the effects of past traumatic experiences are mainly responsible for disorientation and alienation in a diasporic subject. This dilemma becomes particularly manifest in the case of an exile's homecoming, such as Anil Tissera in *Anil's Ghost*.

Exile, nomadism and alienation shape a considerable part of contemporary literature generating distinct paradigms of identity. Anil Tissera, the protagonist in *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje, was born in Sri Lanka, moved to London and then to the US. Ondaatje himself, born in Sri Lanka, emigrated to England and then to Canada, has over the years reflected on these themes through his diasporic characters. In this paper I intend to discuss the many ways in which he tackles various notions of identity from the perspectives of the diaspora, postcolonial and trauma studies, adopting the tools of diaspora and postcolonial studies in the first part of my work.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrating voice drives the reader's attention to issues of the diaspora as we follow Anil arriving at Colombo International Airport. At 33, she is making her return home after "fifteen years" in the West, in London first and in Arizona later. Her initial contact with her motherland is with a "young official", offering her "no help" with her suitcases. A concise exchange is established between them in which we soon learn that Anil now only speaks "a little" Sinhalese and, jet-lagged, she wishes to drink some "toddy" and have a "head massage" (Ondaatje 2000: 9). The official mocks her, commenting: "First thing after fifteen years. The return of the prodigal" (Ondaatje 2000: 10). This brief introduction to the story gains a profound significance, since characters and events in the novel often transcend their literal meaning and are invested with a metaphorical, and sometimes metonymical significance that informs all the major themes in the literary work. Specifically, the encounter between Anil and the unnamed official describes not only the meeting between these two characters, but also the welcoming tribute that Sri Lanka pays to the returning heroine of the story.

Having immediately flung the readers into the heart of the story, the narration soon proceeds providing details about the conflicting forces that make up her identity. Working for a human rights organisation from Geneva, she has been entrusted to write a report of the present situation in the island in collaboration with the local archaeologist Sarath Diasena, with the aim of testifying to the constant violations of human rights during the fratricide civil war in the early 90s.

In this dramatic scenario, the mystifying nature of the protagonist's identity soon materialises. Anil was not in fact her original name, because she was convinced that she had two "inappropriate" (Ondaatje 2000: 67) names and in her early teens she had conducted an uncompromising battle in her family to have them changed. The story goes that instead she preferred her brother's second name, and eventually managed to erode everybody's capacity to resist her from achieving her goal. The terms of the bargain between the siblings are clear: "She gave her brother one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse" (Ondaatje 2000: 68). As well as acting as a proof of the protagonist's stubbornness, this passage is clearly indicative of the ways in which Anil circumscribes the boundaries of her own personal identity. It appears to be an act of intentional appropriation, a resolution that crosses the established limits of gender divisions and a challenge to an ethical transgression. When she ponders her epochal decision, Anil meditates that "Everything about the name pleased her, its slim, stripped-down quality, its fem-

inine air, even though it was considered a male name. Twenty years later she felt the same about it" (Ondaatje 2000: 68). Härting correctly stresses that Anil's choice reveals "a certain androgynous quality of her character" (Härting 2003: 52), but at the same time her meaningful assessment also marks the emancipatory terrain of conquest that she determines to occupy. In her maturity, and especially after her divorce, Anil fully experiences the possibilities of bisexuality becoming in the US the lover of a married man but also the sweetheart of an American female forensic scientist, always showing a strong – at times even violent – emotional feedback and a peculiar purpose in the shaping of her love affairs. While it is true that she is "chronically unlucky in love" (Davis 2009: 17), it is equally true that this tract seems to be the general norm of Ondaatje's protagonists, rather than a weak point in her character. I agree with Burton when she maintains that "Anil is in effect a 'modern woman', with all the gender ambiguity that entails" (Burton 2003: 41). It is worth noticing here that also Cook approaches a similar conclusion, employing in her case the modes of analysis of subaltern studies: in her opinion, Anil "claims a syncretic gender construction that assumes both male and female traits" (Cook 2005: 10).

Careless of the perspective employed, this preliminary approach toward an analysis of Anil's identity seems to be clearly deconstructing assumed forms of fixity and permanence in favour of dynamic and transitory models of identity formation. Deprived of a gender association, she is also the typical example of a diasporic subject establishing one's individuality beyond the conventional bonds with a nation. Born in Sri Lanka, married in England, living in the US but identified also as "the woman from Geneva" (Ondaatje 2000: 71) because of her involvement with an unspecified Centre for Human Rights in Switzerland, Anil's identity seems to be an irresolvable riddle in the plot for all those straining to classify her according to a national identity. Throughout the pages of the novel, Anil's sense of displacement surfaces unmistakably and the following passage may be crucial in revealing how this indicator of identity is assessed: "In her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Santa Fe. She felt completed abroad" (Ondaatje 2000: 54). Her transnational and hybrid status soon becomes evident in the story, bringing as its immediate consequence an equally evident lack of rootedness. When asked about her background by her American lover Cullis, for instance, she becomes curiously evasive and answers: "'I live here', she said. 'In the West'" (Ondaatje 2000: 36).

An analysis of the way in which home and houses operate in the story already provides enough evidence of the radical process of rootlessness at work. With the focus on the protagonist, the narrator stresses that "In the five or six houses of her adult life, her rule and habit was always to live below her means. She had never bought a house and kept her rented apartments sparse" (Ondaatje 2000: 67), demonstrating the clear intention to avoid any risk of settling permanently in a place. Nor should one hasten to conclude that she is unhappy about the places she has chosen to live in. Her implicit choice, in fact, seems to drive her towards an itinerant model of life, establishing as few relationships as possible either with the place or with the people she happens to meet. All her dwellings in the plot seem to confirm that a pattern favouring precariousness and transitoriness prevails: the hotel in

Bandarawela and the *walawwa* in Ekneligoda are surely part of this design. A brief discussion apart is necessary about the quarters on board the Oronsay, an ex-liner berthed in Colombo harbour, used by Anil and Sarath as their laboratory: a doubt remains that the grand ship has a twin purpose for Anil in the plot, being used as a lodging, as well as a workplace. Otherwise, we have no indication whatsoever as to where Anil finds herself in Colombo. In particular, the old colonial house in Ekneligoda and the Oronsay lab share a peculiar and inherent temporary quality since that these are not regular dwellings at present, but may be employed as such, provided that the dwellers are ready to accept compromises and adjust themselves to improvised situations. The implied belief is that these places were not a regular lodging shortly before and may as well stop being used as such in the (near) future.

Plots unravelling in extemporaneous habitations offer a generous contribution to the creation of an archetypical set of characters entirely voted to an erratic existence. Nor, for this same reason, can we say that Anil is the only nomad in the plot, because she seems to be living among her peers, rather than like one on her own. Palipana, to begin with, seems to be the quintessential exile in Ondaatje's fiction, characterised by a blend of isolation, asceticism and (self-imposed) remoteness. Physically retired from civilisation and the material world, he now lives in a forest monastery "in the remnants of a 'leaf hall', with little that was permanent around him" (Ondaatje 2000: 84). Moreover, Gamini, a doctor often busy in the first aid emergency ward, shares with the others the losses and the wants of the homeless. Broken-hearted and drained by the violence of the conflict, he wanders aimlessly when he returns home after some time only to discover that in the meanwhile his place has been occupied. In a state of depression, he finds himself unable to react to a challenging situation and remains passive: the narrating voice tells us that "Two months after his wife left him, Gamini collapsed from exhaustion, and the administration ordered a leave. He had nowhere to go, his home abandoned" (Ondaatje 2000: 215).

The narrator, therefore, privileges descriptions of the world in which identities are shaped by movement and travelling, thus subverting traditional notions. As far as Anil is concerned, readers may recall that there is a significant passage in which she uses the word 'home'. "*Honey, I'm home*" (Ondaatje 2000: 19) is not a cheerful greeting to her companion as soon as she arrives home, but a somewhat cynical greeting used when she approaches a corpse she is going to work on. Furthermore, it can hardly go unnoticed that this controversial form of black humour is emphasised by the narrator by the use of a repetition.

Consequently, emotional estrangement to places and roots works as a major element of connotation of her identity and creates the appropriate conditions to design her as an exemplary case of a transnational subject. A brief inventory of how Anil is classed according to critical analysis reveals that this rootlessness does not constitute a minor challenge. Bolland avoids complications when he identifies her as "a Sri Lankan who has returned to her home country after an education and career in the West", (Bolland 2004: 103) whereas Burrows stresses that she is a "Westernized outsider" (Burrows 2008: 167). Burton chooses to voice the inherent contradictoriness of her identity and maintains that "Anil Tissera is a western-trained forensic scientist who has made a career of using her professional training in the service of political justice in war-torn places like Guatemala. She is also a Sri Lankan

national who has spent most of her adult life away from the island" (Burton 2003: 40). Cook declares that Anil seems to have been sketched out as "the antithesis of Gayatri Spivak's 'subaltern woman'" reaching the conclusion that she possesses a "transnational nature" (Cook 2005: 7), whereas Mowat stresses that "Anil is therefore immediately representative of the 'in-between' location of postcolonial consciousness, with insight into both east and west, and yet fully exemplary of neither" (Mowat 2013: 29).

Synchretism and contradictoriness are therefore strictly related when Anil's identity is in question. Nevertheless, her momentous return to her homeland after a long absence further contributes to rocking the boat. Obviously, her initial itinerary from Sri Lanka to Arizona via London should also be viewed in terms of a passage from a colonised to a coloniser's position, a journey that starts her "'dis-located' position" (Cook 2005: 7). Anil's return to her homeland boosts the dislocating element in her personality and generates havoc in her mind. In *Anil's Ghost* the gap between the place of the coloniser and that of the colonised becomes visible in terms of the East-West divide, haunting Anil no less than the ghost in the title. It is for this reason, therefore, that I will also further my research referring to trauma studies, as well as to postcolonial and diaspora studies. In other words, my intention is to highlight how profoundly diasporas impact on the predicament and dilemmas of immigrants. Trauma has in fact a considerable effect on the ways in which one remembers (or forgets) events, on the ways in which one reacts (or remains passive) in front of obstacles, and on the ways in which one narrates (or remains silent about) one's stories: the twin plot in *Anil's Ghost*, both on a personal and on a metaphorical level, articulates on such premises.

All diasporas produce in the minds of involved subjects multiple perspectives that may seem to be contradictory, ambivalent, antagonistic if not downright incongruous. Nor can one expect them to offer a straightforward picture if their effect is dislocation and if, as Tsuda has correctly pinpointed, diasporas "are now characterized by a tension between centrifugal and centripetal migratory forces" (Tsuda 2013: 172). With all her remarkable contradictions, Anil possesses a capacity to create a bullet-proof jacket against any emotional attachment to her homeland, generating her distinctive rootlessness. When dealing with the universal condition encountered in diaspora fiction, Quayson correctly pinpoints that "all foundational narratives of exile involve destruction of the place called home" (Quayson 2013: 152). Anil's constant resistance to become emotionally involved with her motherland should be read in that specific framework and her obstinate, repeated rejection of her past image as a successful swimmer epitomises a cancellation of her home.

Anil's unconcern in relation to rootedness may also be explained as a consequence to her changed living conditions and as a form of adaptation to new practical needs in a completely different place. Additionally, one cannot simply overlook that such radical changes in diasporic subjects invariably involve displacement and disruption and therefore should also be analysed as traumatic events. Hence, Anil's typical search for foreignness is not only a matter-of-fact response to everyday necessities, but also a defence strategy to avoid the pain caused by the inevitable process of eradication. Specifically, in diasporic subjects estrangement also works as an anaesthetic alleviating the pain caused by the ousting from one's origins.

If *Anil's Ghost* clearly shows what Quayson has aptly labelled 'home destruction', it

is also significantly full of elements relating eradication to traumatic responses. In terms of chronological development, the narrator emphasises that, as soon as her journey away from Sri Lanka starts, Anil is left disoriented, she almost immediately loses her inner strength and is almost unrecognisable in her newly-acquired submissive status.

In her first month in London she'd been constantly confused by the geography around her. (What she kept noticing about Guy's Hospital was the number of doors!) She missed two classes in her first week, unable to find the lecture room. So for a while she began arriving early each morning and waited on the front steps for Dr. Endicott, following him through the swing doors, stairways, grey-and-pink corridors, to the unmarked classroom. (She once followed him and startled him and others in the men's bathroom) (Ondaatje 2000: 141-42).

Not even the narrator's irony, graciously describing Anil at a complete loss and following her teacher up to the men's bathroom, can erase the sense of drama occurring to the protagonist in the brief episode. However, resourceful and determined, she manages to react to her inner feeling of displacement by falling in love with a young Sri Lankan. Convinced of being in love with him, Anil is however also projecting onto him her need for her homeland. Under these premises, their quickly arranged marriage soon crumbles because, if attracted and fascinated by him as "a many-armed seducer", "funny" and a "fervent lover" (Ondaatje 2000: 142), in her unconscious he becomes essential in creating the missing link to her native island. It is interesting to stress in fact that, in the very first description of him, he is associated with an outlandish image of her own country: "It seemed to her he had turned up from Sri Lanka in bangles and on stilts" (Ondaatje 2000: 142). Consequently, shortly afterwards the narrator relates the disappointment over her abortive marriage with her almost abrupt decision to stop speaking Sinhalese. In this sense, it hardly escapes one that Anil suddenly remains an orphan after leaving her country and this event further supports her view of her homeland in terms of an irreparable sense of loss. This is followed by the concise dialogue between her and Sarath, which shows her typical reaction to a great pain by forcing herself to remain silent:

'My parents died in a car crash after I left Sri Lanka. I never got a chance to see them again'.

'I know. I heard your father was a good doctor'.

'I should have been a doctor, but I swerved off into forensics. Didn't want to be him at that time in my life, I guess. Then *I didn't want* to come back here after my parents died' (Ondaatje 2000: 47, italics mine).

In this perspective, once we find her back in Colombo airport fifteen years after her departure, we remain tempted to explain her inability to speak Sinhalese not in terms of an ordinary forgetfulness, but as a clear act of removal.

Under these circumstances, we can only form an idea of how upsetting the return for Anil might be. If memory of her homeland may be thought of as a scar that has never

healed, flying back to Colombo is the equivalent of rubbing salt into the wound. When dealing with diaspora communities, Safran has argued that they all share the myth of return, synthetically described as “the desire to return to that homeland” (Safran 1991: 87), when the proper conditions for it become manifest. As for Anil Tissera, this dream to go back to her roots may seem to be almost evanescent. Of course, the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka can hardly be said to be an alluring invitation. This need becomes neatly visible in only two situations: the first is the meeting with her Tamil ayah Lalitha, while the second occurs when Sarath and Anil have a heated exchange on her role in her homeland soon after she has saved Ananda from committing suicide. In a brief but animated discussion, she shouts at Sarath: “I decided to come back. I wanted to come back” (Ondaatje 2000: 200). Once more, the repetition has the purpose of reinforcing a statement that should achieve the effect of astonishing the reader, showing a completely different face of the protagonist. Of course, this surprising statement stresses that a silent need in relation to her homeland still remains unanswered. While demonstrating to keep the situation at bay for most of the time, once and again unsuppressed emotional bouts suddenly explode in the protagonist’s mind, only to be rapidly sedated. Conflicting and ambiguous reactions therefore emerge in Anil as opposing forces respectively corresponding to an emotional want contrasted by a rational need to contain it. Cook shows insight when she claims that “The language of transnationalism, which Ondaatje speaks through Anil, incorporates the contradictions and paradoxes that are displayed in human and cultural diversity” (Cook 2005: 7).

However, the conflicting relationship between Anil and her homeland does not only emphasise a problematic stance on the part of the protagonist: if on the one hand Anil’s feelings towards her homeland appear to be shaky, on the other, Sri Lanka’s welcome for “the prodigal” (Ondaatje 2000: 10) cannot be considered less unforgiving. *Anil’s Ghost* has already demonstrated to be a tale carefully designed to offer an X-ray film of a migrant’s consciousness in accordance with a number of theories, and here is a further example of its validity. While coping with the predicament of expatriates in the act of making their return to their homeland, Tsuda soon focuses his attention on an “ethnic rejection and social exclusion” (Tsuda 2013: 178) that they remain victims of, because they are regarded as “foreigners and strangers” (Tsuda 2013: 177).

I have already argued that Anil’s arrival at Colombo airport offers a cogent view of how the country remains cold to her. As a government representative, the officer in charge of picking her up at the airport has a mildly hostile attitude because it is no secret that her arrival in the country will produce official documentation on the state of being of Sri Lanka, considered to be an intrusion into local business. Even so, it is not only the officer who shows an unfriendly attitude to her at her return, because at one time or another many other local characters unmask various forms of antagonism and distrust toward her. In Anil’s case the exclusion that expatriates generally experience upon returning to their homeland is widened by her having relocated herself in the West and having crossed the ideological rift that separates the coloniser from the colonised. While nobody ever dares to blame her for having crossed the border separating that imaginary line of power, her constant identification in terms of a Westerner also contains elements of distrust or derision for what is regarded as

a betrayal. The first to voice this mistrust is Dr. Pereira who, judging her by her appearance at their first meeting makes this (unnecessary) comment: “Your dress is Western, I see”, which appears to be a clear act of accusation, so that Anil deems it proper to justify herself: “It’s a habit” (Ondaatje 2000: 26), she claims on the defensive. One may easily understand this provocation: after all, Dr. Pereira and Anil limit their conversation to a formal register of speech also because he has clear government connections. The point, however, is that almost everyone in Sri Lanka occasionally demonstrates to her their suspicion for having turned Westerner, and the plot includes a number of similar cases. Chitra Abeysekera, the young trainee who offers Anil her scientific expertise in her cause, has a friendly attitude to her: in addition, Chitra also shows gratitude to Anil for receiving help with the editing of her CV. However, her stance becomes critical when it comes to evaluating Anil’s decision to leave Sri Lanka, not because she discredits emigration as such, but because Anil made the mistake of choosing the West as her destination. This is an interesting exchange between Chitra and Anil, originated by the protagonist’s concern whether Chitra would be able to carry on her research in a structure that is very restrictive.

‘Tell me what you like about the West’.

‘Oh – what do I like? Most of all I think I like that I can do things on my own terms.

Nothing is anonymous here, is it. I miss my privacy’.

Chitra looked totally uninterested in this Western virtue (Ondaatje 2000: 72).

Once more, the slightly ironic tone adopted by the narrator is instrumental in deflating the drama contained in the message, because what is at stake here is a rejection, even if expressed in a mild form. This is, however, the general atmosphere surrounding Anil at her return, and there seems to be no way out for her. The more so, in view of the fact that not even the people who offer her an unconditioned welcome, those who seem to be ready to share an emotional response, remain indifferent to her switching from the East to the West. Gamini, to start with, successfully establishes an emotional connection with Anil: despite their apparent differences, they share a number of affinities in particular because of their traumatic experiences. After dealing with their empathic consonance, Brians perceptively highlights that Gamini “and the similarly rootless Anil would be drawn to each other” (Brians 2003: 190). Even so, there is a situation in which Anil recollects being witness of a dialogue between Gamini and his brother Sarath when “they spoke of how much they loved their country. In spite of everything. No Westerner would understand the love they had for the place. ‘But I could never leave here’, Gamini had whispered” (Ondaatje 2000: 285). The final sharp comment, although apparently noncommittal, seems clearly directed at her.

Evidently, Burrows is right when she argues that “Anil is an outsider in her own country” (Burrows 2008: 171) and this is not only the result of Anil’s sense of foreignness, but also a direct consequence of a more or less direct veto imposed on her by her ex-compatriots. In a sense, the example offered by Sarath in relation to her acceptance in terms of an Other may seem particularly appropriate to my point. Carefully constructed so as to appear as Anil’s opposite, he wisely constructs a collaborative and reliable relationship with her. However, their mutual trust is not something that is taken for granted from the very beginning: it is



earned little by little as episodes prove that they each deserve it. Their teamwork provides extraordinary results in giving a name to a nameless victim not only because they have successfully joined forces on an intellectual level, but also because they have shared emotions, experiences and perspectives so convincingly that in the end, to save her and her work, Sarath sacrifices his life and becomes the ghost of the novel's title. Despite all this, he too feels the breach that makes her a stranger at home. The narrator convincingly shows that all through the plot he seems to be hesitating to accept her as an ordinary Sri Lankan, and in the course of a heated discussion his position comes to the surface. He and Anil are arguing here about their possible future plans and she accuses him of submissiveness to his government superiors. What follows is his reaction:

You don't understand how bad things were. Whatever the government is possibly doing now, it was worse when there was real chaos. You were not here for that – the law abandoned by everyone, save a few good lawyers. Terror everywhere, from all sides. We wouldn't have survived with *your rules of Westminster then* (Ondaatje 2000: 153-154, italics mine).

Not even Sarath, therefore, the person who most noticeably demonstrates his sense of solidarity toward her and who tends to display a protective attitude for her at various moments in the plot, seems inclined to digest her betrayal for having abandoned the island to live in the West. Sarath's attraction-repulsion towards Anil and her social exclusion are indeed cornerstones of the novel, so that one may argue that they become the two detonators activating the crucial spark in the most dramatic scene in an already dramatic story. Back from Ekneligoda she discovers that Sailor, the skeleton she is working on with Sarath to demonstrate the Government's active involvement in crimes, has disappeared. She is required then to give a speech about the results of their investigation at the Armoury Auditorium and, alone on the stage, she seems to keep her anger at bay for some time. The passage however illustrates in detail that she suddenly loses her control and levels a passionate accusation at the local authorities who pack the room. Not only are her sharp words crucial here, but also Sarath's reception of them:

Sarath in the back row, unseen by her, listened to her quiet explanations, her sure-footedness, her absolute calm and refusal to be emotional or angry. It was a lawyer's argument and, more important, a citizen's evidence; she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, 'I think you murdered hundreds of us'. *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us* (Ondaatje 2000: 271-272).

This is the incrimination that less than 24 hours later he will pay for with his life, but it is most meaningful that on hearing these words Sarath does not object to them because uttered at the wrong time or in front of the wrong audience. Paradoxically, he seems to disavow this accusation because the speaker wrongly considers herself a compatriot. Two brief observations are needed at this stage: the first is that Anil's foreignness results from both the

protagonist's decision to erase 'home' from her mind and from her marginalisation in Sri Lankan society. The second is that silence, her ordinary method for coming to terms with her anguish, now and again collapses and at that time bouts of unsuppressed rage become suddenly manifest.

Anil's story out of, and then back in her country reveal evident symptoms of trauma. The twin journey, away from and back into the homeland, expose a significant net of connections that inevitably shape her mind and create her rootlessness. One may even imagine that her (apparently) instinctive foreignness becomes a sort of a painkiller enabling her to soothe the pain caused by her loss of origins. This damage, however, instead of being appropriately cured, returns like a nightmarish echo on her journey back, when social rejection amplifies the harm received fifteen years before: in other words, her return provides the confirmation that a connection with her motherland is gone and lost. It may be suitable, then, to relate the two forms of traumatic experience placed on two distinct time levels and analyse their possible interconnectedness.

In her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth has widely discussed the weight of the unconscious repetition in traumatic experiences. In the first place, the American researcher claims that trauma should be associated with reiteration, because "in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (1996: 11). In her explanation for the ways in which unresolved forms of trauma reappear in time, she has directly drawn from Freud, analysing the important story of two lovers, Tancred and Clorinda, found in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. Briefly, this story is about the impossible love of Tancred for the beautiful Clorinda who, for a singular twist of fate, appears in her armour in front of him on the battlefield: unidentified by the soldier-lover, she is killed in duel by Tancred himself. A little time later, tortured by his sense of guilt, Tancred slashes a tree with his sword while crossing a magical forest: surprisingly, Clorinda's voice is heard imprisoned in the tree and complaining with him about killing her for the second time. In a very linear way, Caruth writes about the relatedness between the tragic episode creating a trauma left unresolved in the Crusader and the reiteration of the shock in time:

Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on (Caruth 1996: 4).

Similarly, Anil, after abandoning her homeland, was forced to silence her torment caused by the loss of her origins. From her viewpoint, this whole process is analogous to a form of censorship clearly endured in terms of a violent act of repression, that on a figurative level, is equivalent to the elimination of an identity. Consequently, I claim that in her journey away from her homeland, Anil was compelled to suppress her inner self in connection with her place of origin, in order to soothe her pain.

On her return home, these forms of suffering have been all but resolved and, when

overtly exasperated for the widespread boycott she remains a victim of, she imagines being able to control all provocations and remain silent. She is wrong, however, because her inner pride operates unnoticed, upsetting her well-laid plans. When directly addressing the government authorities during the fatal speech in the auditorium, Anil unconsciously starts working on a re-assessment of her identity to match her inner needs. Specifically, she is enacting a switch of identity similar to that already endorsed in her early teens, when she determined to adopt her brother's second name. One should not underestimate that her rebellious nature also involves in this context a certain element of provocation that, when she was a little girl, "had caused anger and frustration within the household" (Ondaatje 2000: 67). At that time for the sake of everyone's peace, her family had surrendered to her will, and had adjusted to her choice. Needless to say, at the time she is talking in front of a full theatre, one cannot expect her spectators to be similarly tolerant. After her speech in the auditorium, Sarath seems very concerned about her and, as soon as he has prevailed over her stubbornness, manages to convince her to hurriedly leave the country the day after. Meanwhile, he shows his total faithfulness to their cause by enabling her to find Sailor and her tape recorder. These are his last resolutions because the next thing we know about him is that he has been assassinated.

My intention at this juncture is to create an imaginary connection between this violent death, which takes place towards the end of the plot, and the trauma which occurred to Anil some fifteen years before, when she was forced to drastically sever the umbilical cord tying her to her motherland and, in a way, to kill a part of herself. Both traumas are the consequence of a strong decision on her part and both of them appear to be a passionate response to an issue in relation to her (national) identity. Their possible inter-relatedness would also be in keeping with Caruth's theory about a reiterated shock, with Anil's initial suppression of her attachment to her homeland intended as the first trauma and Sarath's assassination as "the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder" (Caruth 1996: 11). Far from arguing that Anil intentionally creates the premises for Sarath to find himself trapped in a fatal situation, I maintain rather that it is her unconscious, driven by her previous unassimilated trauma, to design the plan for Sarath's tragic end. After her speech in the theatre, any reader might expect a knockback of one kind or another. Sad as it is, her unwilling implications in Sarath's death also justify her sense of guilt for his loss and ultimately explain why he becomes her ghost. By making a comparison between Anil's silenced self and Sarath, one can explain their relatedness in being both functional links between Anil and her homeland, a link that the rules of diaspora have powerfully shattered and that Anil, very much despite herself, felt impelled to suppress. With *Anil's Ghost*, Ondaatje provides an explanation to Tsuda's contention that "diasporic homecomings are often quite ambivalent, if not negative, experiences" (Tsuda 2013: 177), stretching the boundaries of ambivalence up to the very limit.

*Anil's Ghost* offers an outstanding behavioural example of the maelstrom of conflicting forces at drive in a postcolonial, transnational, diasporic, bisexual subject frantically trying to draw the contours of her own identity. While this seems to be a constant in the whole literary output of Michael Ondaatje rather than a characteristic of *Anil's Ghost* only, it proves successful here in problematising the issue in the context of an immigrant coping with the return to her place of birth.

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**Pier Paolo Piciuccio** is lecturer at the Department of Foreign Languages in the University of Turin, where he regularly teaches courses on English Literature. Over the years, he has focused his attention mainly on postcolonial and postmodern literature. His monograph, *The Two Souls* (2004), is a theory on Black South African Theatre about the negotiations which gave rise to a totally marginalised form of art under the Apartheid regime. He has also edited 7 books on Indian literature – notably among them, *A Companion to Indian Fiction in English* (2004), a panoramic study on the major Indian English novelists – and is the author of about 40 essays.

[pierpaolo.piciuccio@libero.it](mailto:pierpaolo.piciuccio@libero.it)